

# XXIII.

## National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine

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### INTRODUCTION

The National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine (NCCAM), created in February 1999, is among the newest funding units of the National Institutes of Health (NIH). The Center is dedicated to exploring complementary and alternative health practices in the context of rigorous science, educating and training researchers in complementary and alternative medicine (CAM), and disseminating authoritative information to the public and professionals. Investment in research has been identified as the most important strategic goal for accomplishment of the mission of NCCAM. One aspect of this goal is establishment of a global NCCAM research enterprise.

The global research program will establish programs of research on traditional and indigenous health practices in the United States and in countries where the most promising opportunities for CAM research are identified. NCCAM will establish this program in coordination with international organizations and with appropriate respect for the heritage and practices of indigenous peoples. These programs will be aligned with existing NIH-funded international research programs, to ensure (1) the immediate availability of research expertise in the field and (2) the infrastructure to sustain and support them.

The Center is also committed to assisting in the development of a critical mass of international CAM research investigators. In this context, the goals are (1) to increase the number, quality, and diversity of CAM investigators through relevant career development opportunities that expand the capacity of CAM practitioners to conduct rigorous research and (2) to enhance the CAM knowledge and experience of conventional practitioners and researchers.

Among other research interests, NCCAM encourages studies to evaluate the interactions of traditional and Western medicine within a country's cultural context. One

question is of major importance. Are the two systems of medicine practiced independently and even antagonistically, or is there some degree of integration? In some developing countries, a patient may first consult a traditional practitioner and seek care from a Western-style physician only for unresponsive, very serious, or chronically debilitating conditions. In this setting, it may be best to integrate the basic constructs of primary prevention into the care provided by traditional practitioners. Similarly, the Western-style physician might incorporate effective interventions of the traditional practitioner.

The international character of CAM requires that NCCAM develop a broad-based international research program that reaches out to CAM practitioners and assesses CAM practices around the world. However, because the health care practices of CAM may be foreign to the conventional Western biomedical system, they may need to be studied in cultural context that makes them relevant. Culturally sensitive research approaches are needed within the parameters of locations and populations where discrete CAM systems are practiced. NCCAM will enhance this international program by performing the following functions:

- evaluating use of traditional medicine in the country of origin, including its relationship to conventional Western biomedicine;
- conducting joint research with traditional healers and conventional scientists to treat or prevent disease;
- performing controlled clinical evaluations of promising traditional interventions; exchanging information on recent scientific advances and their appropriate application to public health; and
- serving as a World Health Organization (WHO) Collaborating Center in Traditional Medicine and meeting the terms of reference—research, communications, and consultation.

NCCAM will approach these objectives by supporting relevant grants and contracts to universities and other research organizations both nationally and internationally. As an initial step in this direction, NCCAM is cosponsoring the Global Network for Women and Children together with the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, NIH.

In late fiscal year 2000, an international search was begun to identify a Director of International Research to head the new NCCAM Office of International Research. This Director will develop a long-range strategic plan that will guide the new office and will be congruent with the 5-year strategic plan for NCCAM.

### SUMMARY OF INTERNATIONAL PROGRAMS AND ACTIVITIES

#### Activities With International and Multinational Organizations

As part of its responsibilities as a WHO Collaborating Center in Traditional Medicine, NCCAM provided substantial input into draft WHO Guidelines for Methodologies on Research and Evaluation of Traditional Medicine. These guidelines were discussed and made final at a WHO meeting in Hong Kong, China, in April 2000. The general objectives of the guidelines are as follows:

- to harmonize certain important and acceptable definitions in the field of traditional medicine;
- to summarize key issues focusing on methods for research on and evaluation of traditional medicine;
- to improve the quality of research in the field of traditional medicine and CAM; and
- to provide additional appropriate and acceptable evaluation methods to facilitate the establishment of regulation and registration in the field of traditional medicine.

NCCAM staff participated in an international symposium on traditional medicine, sponsored by the WHO Kobe Center for

Health Development, in Awaji, Japan. The purpose of the meeting was to present state-of-the-science reports on research, policy, and delivery of services in traditional medicine.

### **International Meetings**

The Office of International Research plans to participate in meetings on research in traditional CAM, in Botswana, Canada, Guatemala, Japan, Peru, Saudi Arabia, and

Vietnam, to further the NCCAM international agenda and to identify partners and stakeholders in such studies.